

Exploring University Branding: Employers' Expectation On University Graduates On Competency  
*(Meneroka Penjenamaan Universiti: Jangkaan Majikan Terhadap Kecekapan Para Graduan Universiti)*

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates the employers' expectation on the competency among a leading Malaysian public university's graduates. The expectation is based on the employer's perception on our graduates' capability and performance in their job. However, the incompetent university graduates have become a prevalent issue in the labor industry. Though the graduates have received higher learning education, they were perceived lacked in generic competencies that are vital in job performance. This has made the graduate employability becoming the national issue of the country. A quantitative survey approach employed in this study. The sampling frame was from university's tracer study of consisting of employers' data. The study used systematic random sampling to achieve theoretical generalization. The survey was administered by postal and online to encourage participation from the employers. The study assesses the competency of these graduates in seven skills which were communication, higher order thinking, leadership, technical, teamwork and personal traits. The outcome of the study revealed that the quality of our graduates in the labor industry is essential. Significantly, the graduates are indirectly carrying the university's branding. Implementation of the study will improve the academic and curricular content in the university so that it will match with the industry's demands.

Keywords: graduate employability, student development, soft skills, university branding

ABSTRAK

*Kajian ini meneliti jangkaan majikan terhadap kecekapan para graduan di universiti awam. Jangkaan majikan ini berdasarkan keupayaan dan prestasi para graduan untuk memperolehi pekerjaan selepas mereka bergraduasi. Namun begitu, ketidakcekapan graduan universiti telah menjadi satu isu penting yang hangat dibincangkan dalam industri buruh. Walaupun, graduan telah mencapai pengajian tinggi, mereka masih kurang kecekapan generik yang sangat diperlukan dalam prestasi pekerjaan. Hal ini telah menjadi isu nasional di negara ini. Oleh itu, satu kaedah kajian berbentuk kajian lapangan kuantitatif digunakan dalam kajian ini. Persampelan kajian pula diambil daripada kajian pengesanan berdasarkan data majikan. Kajian ini menggunakan teknik persampelan rawak mudah untuk mencapai teori generalisasi. Kaedah kutipan soal selidik dilakukan melalui pos dan juga dalam talian untuk menggalakkan penglibatan para majikan dalam kajian ini. Kajian ini menilai kecekapan para graduan dari tujuh aspek kemahiran iaitu komunikasi, daya pemikiran tinggi, kepimpinan, teknikal, kerja berkumpulan dan sifat peribadi. Hasil kajian ini menunjukkan kualiti graduan universiti di industri buruh adalah sangat penting. Kualiti graduan ini adalah salah satu kriteria penting dalam pembangunan penjenamaan universiti. Implikasi kajian ini ialah dapat meningkatkan kandungan kurikulum dan akademik agar dipadankan dengan permintaan industri.*

*Kata kunci: kebolehkerjaan graduan, pembangunan pelajar, kemahiran insaniah, penjenamaan universiti*

## INTRODUCTION

### Background of the Study

This study investigates the expectations that employers have toward a leading Malaysian public university's graduates in their organization. Recent study in Canada found that professional maturity, soft skills especially problem solving, continuous learning and academic achievement are highly regarded by employers' expectations (Chhinzer & Russo, 2018). Moreover, the qualities of our graduates are measured in diverse skills such as basic, communication, higher order thinking, leadership, technical, teamwork and personal traits. The study is indeed important for us to know whether our graduates are relevant to job market globally and locally. The companies that included in the study are from private, multinational, government link company (GLC), non-government organization (NGO) to government bodies.

According to Maxwell and Armellini (2018), it is essential to develop an integrative framework of developing personal literacy and graduate identity. This framework can help graduates to understand better their own identity and competency. Today's graduates may need to acquire new knowledge and skills as compared to previous century. Recent study in Australia proved that social media skills and training were important for graduate employability. It is interesting to note that this study examined student attitudes towards the delivery of social media pedagogy at university. Mastering social media proficiency is vital for graduate employability now and in the future (Sutherland & Ho, 2018).

Graduate marketability or employability is the key indicator of university's effort in providing human capital in the country. The quality of the graduates is determined by the perception of their employers in terms of their work performance in the organization (Chhinzer & Russo, 2018). Indirectly, the graduates will also carry the branding of the university in the workplace. Non-quality graduates in the job market are definitely will tarnish the reputation of university (Kee, Fauziah, Faridah, & Nie, 2012). Thus, it is very important for university to provide valuable formal education to the students during university years. Hence, the graduates will be relevant to the job market and being favored by employers to be recruited.

Skills that are required for the graduates as employees could be varied; it is depending on the nature of the business of the company. However, in terms of creating a global talent for our graduates does

need a long term efforts for university. Nowadays, employers are not only looking for graduates that have excellent technical and knowledge on the job itself, but also the employees should be equipped with extra personal skills (Sutherland & Ho, 2018). For example, accounting graduates are expected not only know how to do accounting tasks but also be part of strategist in the company that will bring positive growth of the company. In that case, the graduates are expected to have skills beyond academic and technical but also to be as a lifelong learner, think alike 'global citizen', social actor and personal development to prepare for unknown future of business (Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008, Maxwell & Armellini, 2018).

The Ministry of Education has defined the graduate employability (GE) as working, further study, skills improvement in training and waiting for placement in jobs. The employability of the graduates has been measured yearly during convocation after several months they completed their final semester. In most public universities, the students finished their final exam in June and convocation will be held in October annually. Therefore, graduates' tracer study always held during convocation.

The Ministry of Education urges all universities to plan and implement graduates' tracer study throughout Malaysia. In year 2012, the graduate employability of a leading Malaysian public university's graduates was 81.5%, this percentage is seem lower than graduate employability in year 2011 (83.3%). However, in year 2010 and 2009, the graduate employability's percentage is 74.1% and 69.8% respectively. The vast differences of percentage in the recent two years with the prior two years are due to the difference of graduate employability's definition. The graduate employability in prior two years (2009 and 2010) were defined as working and further studies only, that may the reason why the percentage looks lower than 2011 and 2012.

### Problem Statement

The issue of fresh graduates are not competent to work is prevalent in the news. This is due to fresh graduates are not prepared with the professional experiences and university should provide more comprehensive skills to match with industry demands (Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008, Maxwell & Armellini, 2018).

Lack of generic competencies in graduates has made them less marketable in the industry. Generic competencies such as communication, interpersonal, leadership, teamwork, writing, problem solving and other skills that perceived as significant for the employees to perform well in their jobs (Chhinzer & Russo, 2018).

The main reason for the issue of employability of the graduates is the failure of transferring the classroom learning to the job in the industry. This is due to the Malaysian academic system that is traditional in preserving academic values rather than including the skills needed in workplace. The Ministry of Higher Education (now the Ministry of Education) also supported this view. A finding of a graduate study made by the Ministry of Higher Education in year 2004 has revealed the jobless graduates are at a staggering amount of 29% and 14% of total graduates further their studies (Quek, 2005). Recent study by Kamaliah et. al., (2018) found that the effect of supervised work experiences (SWEs) can improve graduate employability.

The Malaysia's Ministry of Human Resources also revealed the perception of corporate sectors on our graduates in which they are only good in theories but do not have intended skills needed for the job (New Straits Time, 2002 as cited in Quek, 2005). Not only that, the graduates also deficient in learning skills, which mean they do not know how to learn from the experts in the organization. That has made the 16,000 Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) graduates were problematic in finding jobs (New Straits Time, 2004 as cited in Quek, 2005).

The employers in manufacturing and service sectors also declined to employ fresh graduates. This is simply because the fresh graduates lack in generic competencies. For example, graduates failed to update their knowledge in technology or unable to possess problem-solving skills and adapt to work environment (Quek, 2005, Chhinzer & Russo, 2018).

Unemployment rates in Malaysia still consider low in Asia, however the number of unemployed graduates were increasing from year 2001 ( $n=38,800$ ) to  $n=60,000$  in 2005, that was 54.64% of incremental rate. The majority of unemployed graduates were Bumiputra (94.7%) as compared to Chinese (3.7%) and Indian (1.6%). Social sciences graduates are the most unemployed, followed by economics, accountancy, business and Islamic studies. Female graduates were common to have higher unemployment rate compared to male, due to their number is bigger than male in tertiary education (Annie & Jamil, 2006).

Therefore, two objectives are developed to examine the current knowledge and skills acquired by employers as follows:

#### 1. Research Objectives

1) To determine the level of knowledge and hard skills of graduates from a leading Malaysian public university as perceived by employers and,

2) To determine the level of soft skills of graduates from a leading Malaysian public university

as perceived by employers.

#### Significant and limitation of the study

The study fill in the gap of knowledge of what is the employers' expectation to our graduates. The quality of our graduates and the keenness of employer to hire our graduates right after they finished their study in the university are obviously correlated. Employers will definitely hire quality graduates that possess necessary generic competencies and positive personal traits. A non-quality graduates who became employees of the organization will definitely be a burden or liability to the organization.

Graduate employability rate is an indicator of university's performance in producing quality graduates that are sought after in the job market. In which it also indirectly measure the relevant of academic content in the university. If the academic content is not matching with industry demands, it will affect the graduate employability negatively.

The result of the study did not generalize to all graduates in the country. It is only meant for a leading Malaysian public university's graduates. The employers who involved in the study are companies that the leading Malaysian public university's graduates went to work after their completion of studies.

## METHODOLOGY

The respondent of the study is the employer who has hired a leading Malaysian public university's graduates. The sampling frame is from the tracer study 2012 database in which the graduates have to fill the survey during their convocation. Employed graduates have updated the employers' information in the tracer's survey. The tracer survey is administered online questionnaire by the Ministry of Education annually since 2006.

The study targeted employers in big companies like public limited, multinational corporation, government link companies and government bodies. Therefore, the study has employed a convenient sampling technique in getting the sample from  $N=3000$  employers' data we have in the tracer study. According to Krejcie & Morgan (1970), population of  $N=3000$  should have a sample  $n=341$ . Since it is the convenient sampling technique, we chose the well-known and established organizations to be the respondents of the study from the sample frame.

After conveniently choose the companies from the list, we will administered the questionnaire

by postal and online in total 350. We conducted online questionnaire by using Google Drive application in the second month in order to encourage participation. In order to avoid the duplication of answers, we called up

the company personally whether they prefer to reply back by post or answer the questionnaire online. Refer to Table 1 for the survey progression.

TABLE 1. Survey's data collection progression

No.	Method	Month/Week			
		June			
		<u>Week 1</u>	<u>Week 2</u>	<u>Week 3</u>	<u>Week 4</u>
1	Postal questionnaire	40 questionnaires	40 questionnaires	40 questionnaires	Received 51 responds
		July			
		<u>Week 1</u>	<u>Week 2</u>	<u>Week 3</u>	<u>Week 4</u>
2	Online questionnaire (Google Drive)	40 questionnaires	40 questionnaires	Received 59 responds	Running SPSS for 92 usable responds

The survey instrument was generated based on previous studies. For section B and C of the questionnaire was adapted from the study of Modul Pembangunan Kemahiran Insaniah (Soft Skills) untuk Institusi Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia by Radin et. al (2006). Section D referred to Graduate Tracer and Employers' Expectation Studies (2006) of National Council for Higher Education in Uganda. Later, the instruments reviewed by the selected educators and experts. The final instruments consisted of two sections (section C and D). In which, the section C consist of 30 items but have 60 measurements. This is because each item (statements) has two measurements which are 'level of importance of key attributes to organisation' and 'level of achievement of graduates' in 5-point Likert Scale (1=very low, 2=low, 3=moderate, 4=high, 5=very high). Section C has seven dimensions which are basic skills (3 items), communication skills (5 items), higher order thinking skills (6 items), leadership skills (5 items), technical skills and others (3 items), personal traits (3 items), and teamwork skills (5 items).

On the other hand, section D has 10 items but only the first 9 item are measured in 5-likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree). The last item (10th) is open ended, leaving space for respondents to wrote down their suggestions on how to make the graduates are more relevant to the labor industry.

Meanwhile, the first two sections in the questionnaire were about respondents' profiles. Section A consisted demographic profiles such as gender, age, academic qualification and position. Section B was about company's background details pertained to type of organization, industry, number of employees, graduates that being employed in the company in the past year and how many graduates has been recruited in the organization, graduates functional level in the company, and employer's expectation when employing graduates.

Data analysis of the questionnaire consists of close and open ended questions. The data measured in scale and string data for nominal, ordinal, interval and ratio variables. The Google Drive response sheet (look alike Microsoft Excel) converted to a Social Package Statistic Software (SPSS) file. The result of the postal questionnaire was typed in manually into Social Package Statistic Software (SPSS) file. The survey analyzed by descriptive statistics that presented means scores and frequency only. The open ended answers were recorded in the result table. The determinant frequencies of the open ended answers were accumulated based on the similarity of the answers, which mean, researcher executes simple content analysis for the qualitative data.

The pre-test for the questionnaire has been run and the Cronbach's alpha is  $\alpha=.704$  among 30

respondents (refer Table 2). This means, the instruments was having a strong relative internal consistency and reliability coefficient .70 and above is consider acceptable in most social research situations.

TABLE 2. Reliability Statistics

N of Items	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ )
80	.904	.704

## RESULT

This section presented the result that we obtained from the survey that we have implemented. According to Table 3, most of the respondents (n=28) expect

graduates should have soft skills and be creative to work independently in working environment. Also, respondents expect (n=27) graduates to be multi-tasks in order to perform in the organization.

TABLE 3. Distribution of Employer's Expectation on Graduates

Expectation	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
To apply soft skills to a working environment creatively and able to work independently	28	30.4
To function multi-tasks given in a high performing team environment	27	29.3
To apply core knowledge learnt in university to a real-world environment	20	21.7
To understand skills in building and sustaining strategy development for the organisation	17	18.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Findings of this study revealed that graduates' best practices as employees perceived by employers. There are two levels of measurements that needed to be compared between the importance of key attributes to respondents' organization versus level of achievement of UPM graduates perceived by respondents in the attributes.

Graph 8 described the level of basic skills among graduates. Skill on 'ability to listen actively' among graduates was significant high, but the level

of importance on the skill is comparatively low (respondents' mean score is 3.96). However, it seems like graduates did not reach the level of expectation from employers in which the mean scores were low on 'ability to read with understanding' and 'ability to speak so others can understand'.

Refer to Graph 9, graduates' communication skills did not reach the level that respondents expected in performing their tasks. The lowest mean score was  $\mu = 3.79$  on 'ability to communicate in English'

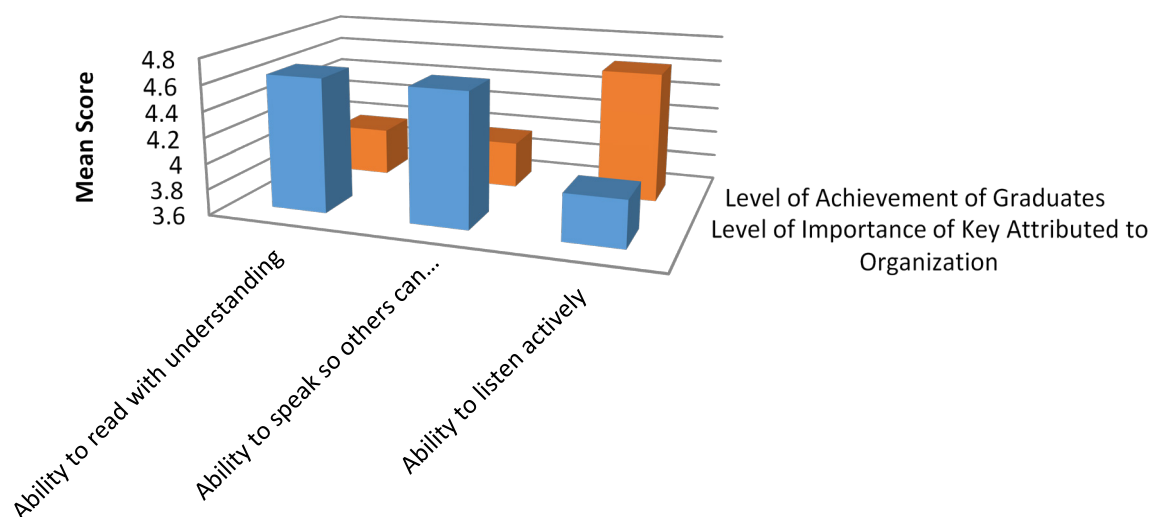


as compared to its importance of key attributes to the organization was quite high ( $\mu = 4.59$ ).

Graph 10 presented the level of employers' perception on graduates' higher order thinking skills

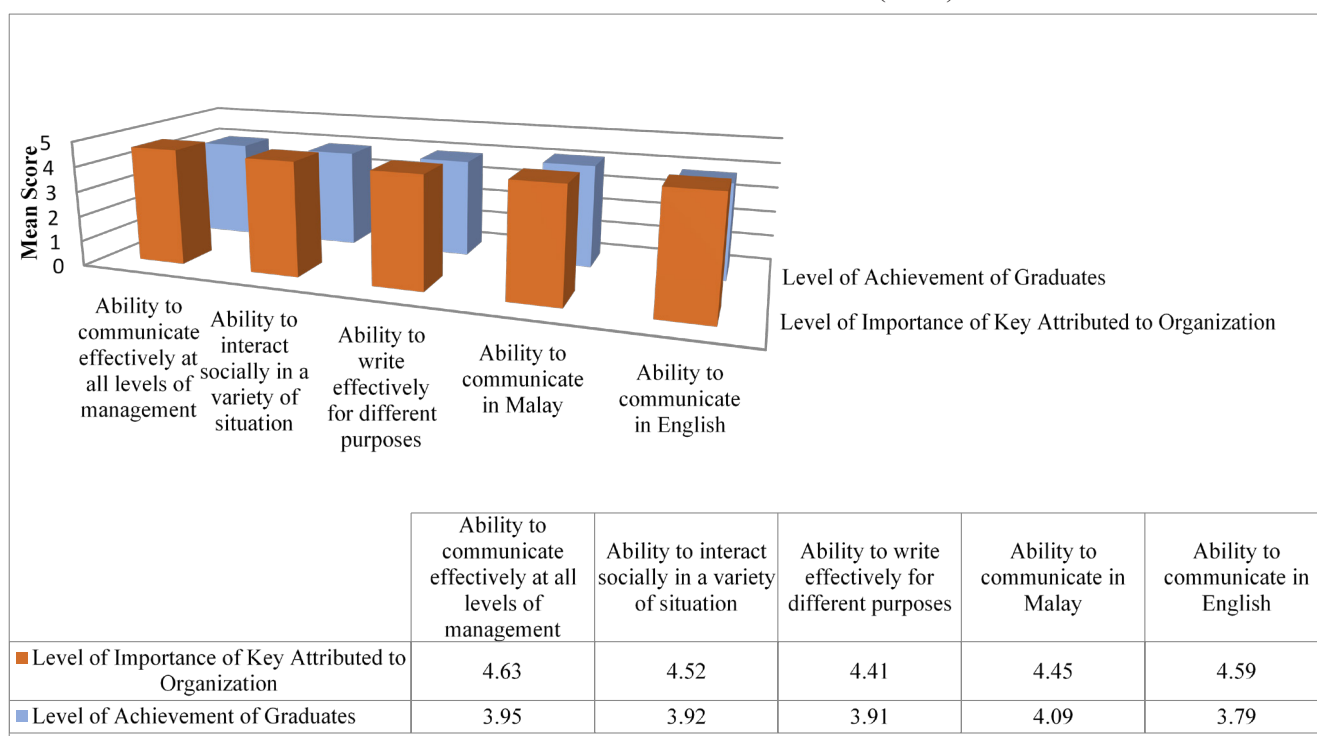
that shown the level of achievement of graduates and the level of importance of key attributes toward organization. It shown the levels of achievement of graduates were low in all attributes.

GRAPH 8. Basic Literacy Skills (n=92)

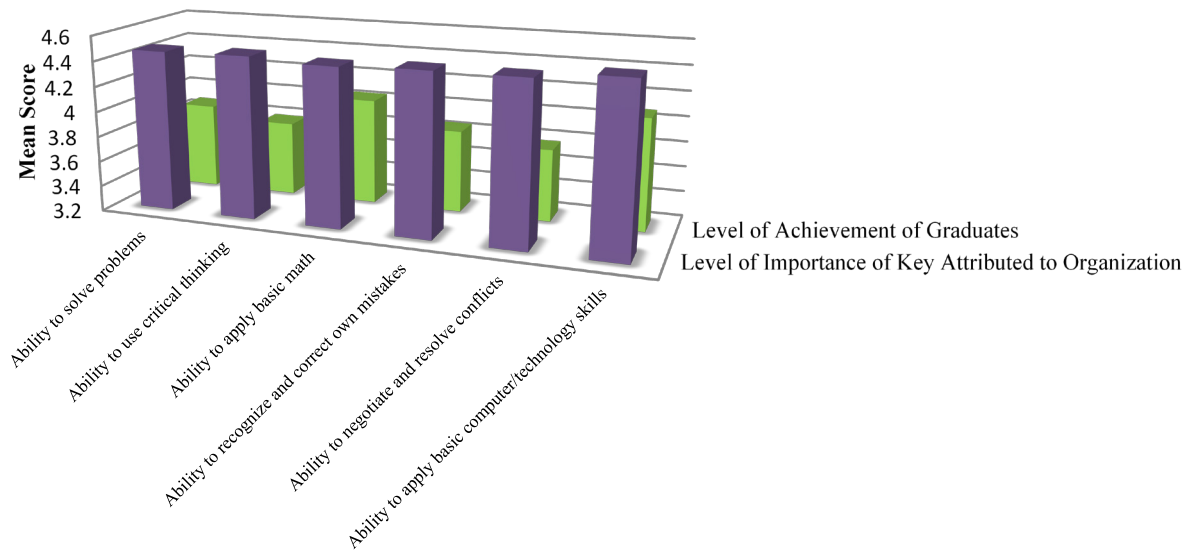


	Ability to read with understanding	Ability to speak so others can understand	Ability to listen actively
Level of Importance of Key Attributed to Organization	4.64	4.63	3.96
Level of Achievement of Graduates	3.97	3.96	4.61

GRAPH 9. Communication Skills (n=92)



GRAPH 10. Higher Order Thinking Skills (n=92)

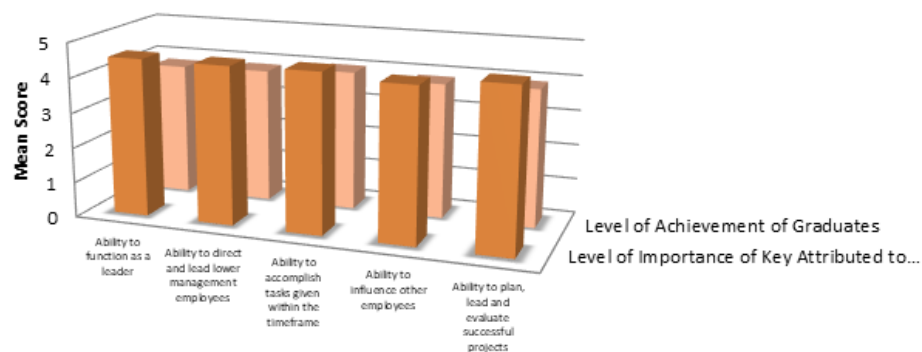


	Ability to solve problems	Ability to use critical thinking	Ability to apply basic math	Ability to recognize and correct own mistakes	Ability to negotiate and resolve conflicts	Ability to apply basic computer/technology skills
Level of Importance of Key Attributed to Organization	4.47	4.48	4.45	4.47	4.47	4.52
Level of Achievement of Graduates	3.88	3.79	4.04	3.85	3.77	4.08

Leadership skills among graduates show in the Graph 11. The level of achievement of graduates were not matched with the level of importance of leadership

skills needed in the respondents' organization. Graduates scored low in all leadership attributes.

GRAPH 11. Leadership Skills (n=92)

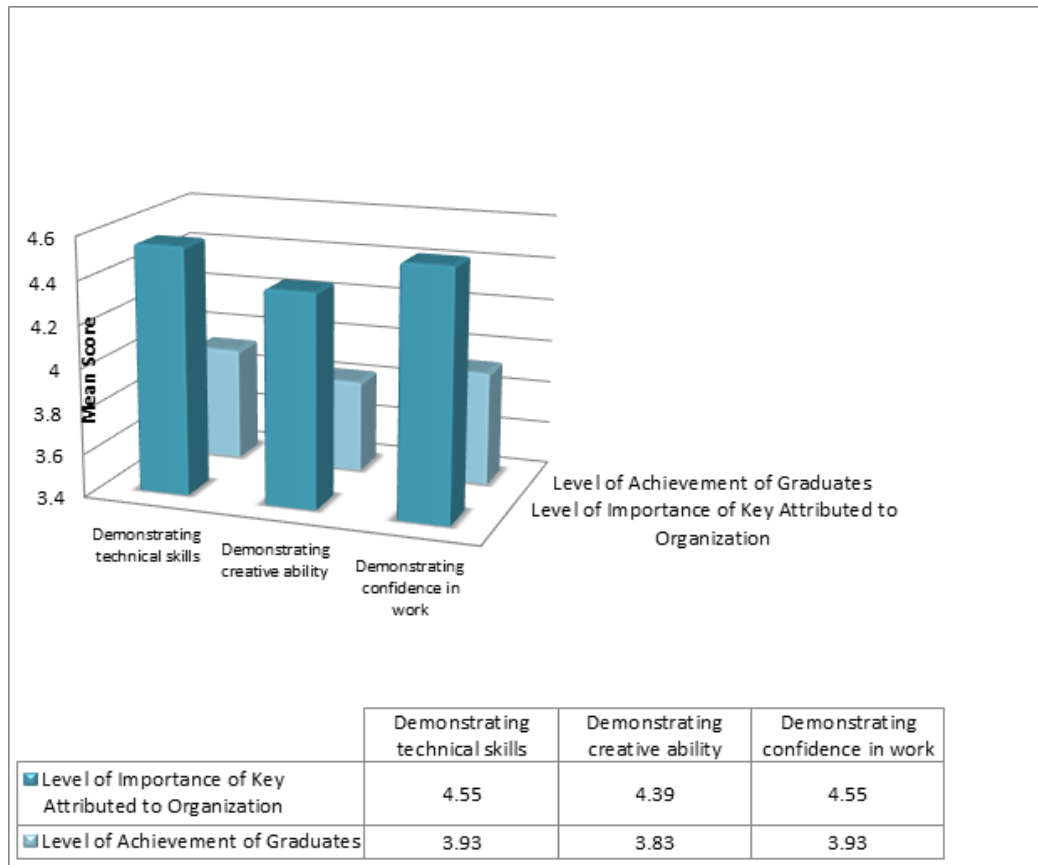


	Ability to function as a leader	Ability to direct and lead lower management employees	Ability to accomplish tasks given within the timeframe	Ability to influence other employees	Ability to plan, lead and evaluate successful projects
Level of Importance of Key Attributed to Organization	4.52	4.51	4.54	4.38	4.59
Level of Achievement of Graduates	3.8	3.85	4	3.86	3.92

Graph 12 show that graduates scored very low and did not matched with the employers' expectations. Level of importance in each key attribute of graduates'

technical skills and others (creativity and confidence) were comparatively higher than the level of achievement of graduates in the organization.

GRAPH 12. Technical Skills & Others (n=92)



Graph 13 depicted the low level of graduates' achievements in personal traits as compared to level of importance of those traits in the respondents' organization. The lowest mean score was graduates show low motivation toward work as compared to what employers expect.

Graph 14 show that graduates possessed low achievement in teamwork skills as compared to its importance of that skill in the respondents' organization. The lowest mean score was  $\mu=3.98$  for 'ability to coach team-mates to get the work done'.

The findings of this study presented the suggestions by employers on how to make the graduates are more relevant to the labor industry. Based on Graph 15, most respondents suggested university should do constant job market assessment ( $\mu=4.62$ ), followed by university should make the training more practical ( $\mu=4.45$ ) and should provide more career guidance ( $\mu=4.43$ ).

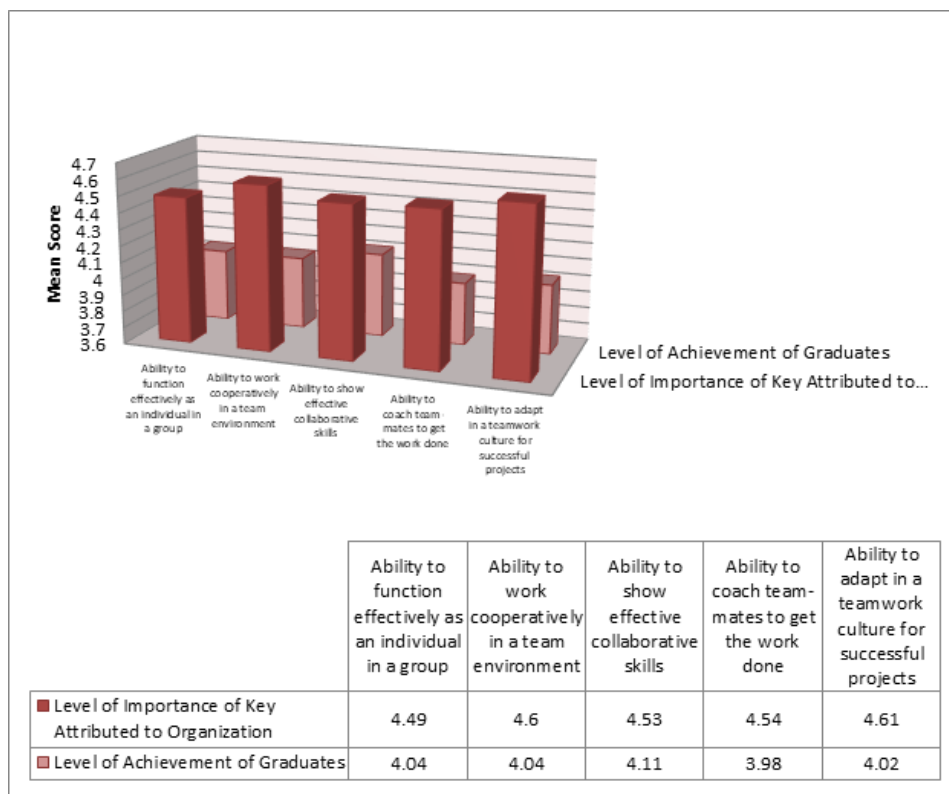
## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The study has measured the perceptions on employers have toward a leading Malaysian public university's graduates in labor industry. The graduates obviously have lower skills than what employers expected in performing their jobs. This reflects that our graduates cannot perform well in the job. Based on the additional suggestions provided by the respondents of the study, our graduates lack in confidence, knowledge, technical skills, communication skills (especially English language) and practical training should be more than 6 months. This is to ensure our graduates' qualities are matched with the labor industry. This result is supported by recent study by Chhinzer & Russo, (2018) that graduate competency must be measured by professional maturity and problem-solving skills too.

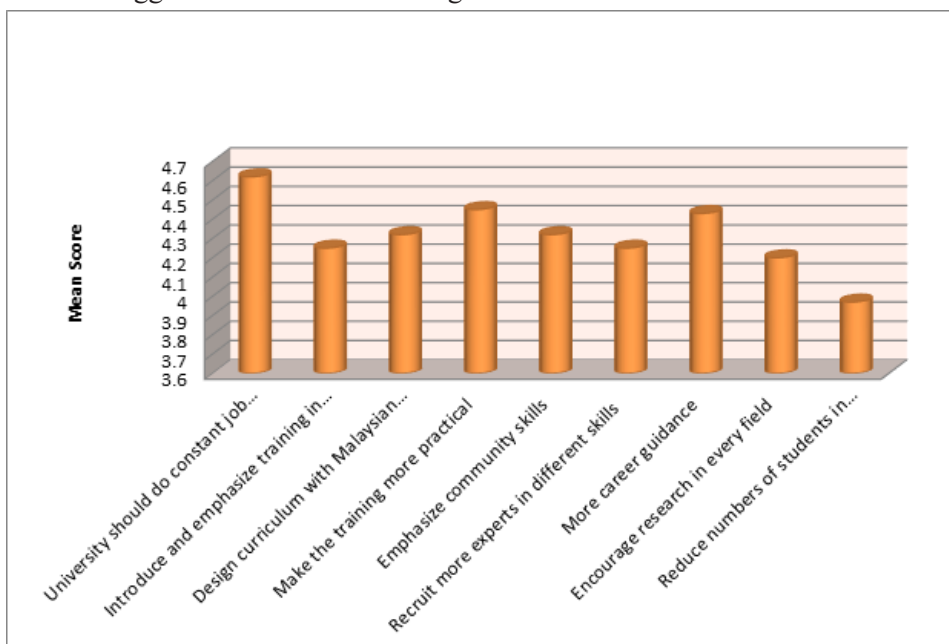
In a work environment, there are a lot of ad hoc things that needed to be tackled promptly. This means the employees needed to be more responsive and better be proactive in handling and solving the problem. University should provide more 'role play' in



GRAPH 14. Teamworks Skills (n=92)



GRAPH 14. Suggestions on how to make graduates are more relevant to the labor industry



the class and given out the comprehensive but critical assignments to the students. This is important for nurturing the higher order thinking skills among the students. Our graduates also scored low in leadership skills. Thus, we need more professional in coaching the students in leadership. The professional must be

qualified from the industry not from academic. This result is very related to recent study by Maxwell & Armellini, (2018) that graduates must be equipped with personal literacy skills and positive identity.

English competency is low and this has affected their basic skills (ability to read with understanding and

speak so others can understand). The students needed to have more individual assignments that made them compulsory to present their assignments in classes. Our graduates also seem to have lower coping skills (cannot negotiate well or solving conflicts). This may happen since they are having lower skills in communication. Therefore, it is indeed vital for the students know how to speak. The study also suggests the academic division should made public speaking course as compulsory to all students.

Our graduates also have low teamwork skills and personality traits. This can be improved by having motivation programs that will improve the behavior and self-concept of our students. The motivators that invited to a leading Malaysian public university must be those with professional and academic qualifications. Those who students can sought after and idolize.

By improving means and ways on how the students are taught and experienced during university years, the impact will be immense. The leading Malaysian public university can be one of the best in producing human capital for the country. Graduates are expected to be the manager or leader and be one of important individuals in the organization. They should be more competent than those with lower academic qualification.

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